

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Wallace Takara

“See, before the war [World War II], in America and in Japan, cooking job was the lowest job. That’s why, even us, we be cook, eh? Then the friends tell us, ‘Hey, what are you doing?’ We no tell we been cook. We tell we doing something else. Because before days, shame, you tell them you cook. That’s why. But after the war, cooking job came number one.”

Wallace Takara, one of four children, was born in Hakalau, Hawai‘i in 1920 to Kosuke and Otome Takara, immigrants from Oroku, Okinawa. His father, a plowman on the sugar plantation, supplemented the family income by running a taxi-service. His mother, a field worker, also raised poultry and sold eggs.

Wallace Takara completed the second grade at Hakalau School, but continued his education in Honolulu where his family moved to join a relative in hog and poultry farming. His formal schooling stopped after the ninth grade.

At about thirteen years of age, he began his long career in the restaurant trade. His first job was as a dishwasher, busboy, and kitchen helper at Kaimukī Inn; it was followed by a stint at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel and the Ramona Cafe. As he trained and gained more culinary skills, he was hired as a chef at Queen’s Surf, Don the Beachcomber’s, the Pacific Club, the Cavalier, and Japan Airlines.

He and Roger Kaneshiro owned and operated TK Diner. Nel’s Café was also under the ownership of Wallace and Kiku Takara.

Recognized as an award-winning chef many times, Wallace Takara is now retired and resides with his family in Honolulu.

Tape No. 40-20-1-02

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Wallace Takara (WT)

Honolulu, O'ahu

November 12, 2002

BY: Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto (MK)

MK: This is an interview with Mr. Wallace Takara at his home in Honolulu, O'ahu on November 12, 2002. The interviewer is Michiko Kodama-Nishimoto.

Okay, Mr. Takara, I know that today you have a prepared statement. So if you can read the statement into the tape recorder, that would be good.

WT: All right.

My first job was Kaimukī Inn. And then one day my cousin, Saburo Takara, got me a job at Royal Hawaiian Hotel as his helper. He was a sauce cook. Two years later he quit Royal Hawaiian to open his own restaurant called Ramona Café. I worked at Royal Hawaiian until December 7, 1941. Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field. That morning, I went to work. After finish work, went home. Two M.P. [military police] soldiers was in the yard waiting and they ask me if I was Wally. I said, "Yes." Told me to get in the car, took me to Hickam Field, all the building was bombed. M.P. took me to office made in tent. The officer told me, "Tomorrow we're going to open field kitchen. You are going to be the head cook because all the cooks and the kitchen helpers died." That evening they gave me ham-and-cheese sandwich and coffee for my dinner. That night, I slept in underground bomb shelter. In the morning, they brought six local cooks to work with me. We worked six months until they brought army cooks from Mainland.

All local cooks were transferred to Red Hill. They were building Navy hospital. They used us as carpenter helpers. After finish with hospital building, they transfer our group to Kahuku Air Field. We were working as a dynamite blaster, blasting rocks for air field. After finish, we were transferred to Schofield quarry, side of the mountain, as rock blaster. Rocks to make concrete for runway. Eighteen local boys was working as a blaster. One day, army officer gave us application to join the army. Next day, they came for the application. One officer called me. He told me I was more important working here than going to the army, and he threw away my application, army application. They want me to train the army how to blast dynamite, so I was really busy training.

One day the war was over. Later, went to Royal Hawaiian Hotel to work as a cook. About a year after, the manager from Queen's Surf Restaurant told me to work for them as a chef. Better pay, so I took the job. They were very happy with my food preparation. One night they had hundred-fifty person party. After serving I have to go in dining room to talk to the customer, see how the food was all right. One customer took me back of the dining room, told me he is manager at the Don the Beachcomber Restaurant. His name

was Al Jackson. And he made a deal with me, more pay, more pay raise. Then, I quit Queen's Surf and took the job at Don the Beachcomber as a chef. After a year, I took job at Pacific Club as chef. They were happy because I was experienced chef. Most big party I made ice carving. Most chefs don't carve ice decoration. Then, after two years Pacific Club manager quit, so I quit the job because he was so nice to me. After, I went back to Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

Few months later, [Teamster's] Union president, Mr. [Arthur] Rutledge, told me the union sending me to Mainland to learn more about cooking. So, I thank him for choosing me. While working, the local boys telling me not to go Mainland because after the war people in Mainland don't understand Oriental, but I went to California. And I was staying at J-Town. Two days later, I went to union office, they ask me, "You want to work in a hotel or a restaurant?"

I said, "Italian restaurant. I want to learn Italian cooking."

So, the union office worker drove me to Hollywood, close to MGM Studio and introduced me to Italian restaurant manager. The manager told me I'm hired, but I ask him about renting a room. He took me three apartments, but since I was Oriental, they say no. So, I didn't take the job.

After I walked all the way to Hollywood Boulevard, I went in 49er's Restaurant having lunch. Somebody on the side of me say, "Wally, what you doing here?" When I saw him, I cannot believe. Harry used to work with me at Queen's Surf in Hawai'i. He told me he is manager of this restaurant. He said, "Wally, you want to see our kitchen?" He took me to the kitchen. He introduced the chef to me and he told the chef today was his last day of working because Chef Wally going take over. But, the manager never mentioned about working to me, about working there. Since he let the chef go, I must help him take over the job. So I told him, I need a room to stay. Then, I was surprised, he gave me a room in the restaurant. I worked two months. Because the job was too easy, I decided to go Madison, Wisconsin.

At Wisconsin, I stayed in a hotel. One day, I saw in a newspaper ad, "Chef wanted in Elks Club." I took the job as a chef, manager was happy with my cooking. One day they had 200-person party, menu say regular dinner, roast beef, and then dessert, strawberry Jell-O. That day manager come in the kitchen and say, "Chef, have to get ready with your Jell-O."

I say, "It's all ready."

He asked me, "Where?"

I told him, "In the icebox."

Then he told me, "Don't put Jell-O in the icebox next time. Put Jell-O on the windowsill because Wisconsin is a cold place."

Then, he asked me if I got the roast beef ready, I told him, "All ready."

He asked me, "How did you cook your roast beef?"

I told him, "Medium-rare." He told me in Wisconsin roast beef must be cooked well-done. (MK chuckles.) And then, every restaurant and hotel where I worked, roast beef

has been medium-rare. And a few days later, 300-dinner-party menu says decoration, ice carving, eagle and swan. So I order two big blocks of ice and I carve the eagle and the swan. Then the manager came in and told me to order ice carving.

I told him, "It's already carved—it's in the freezer."

So, he was surprised. Ice carving was so nice because all the time I carve ice. But, he said, "Next time, you just order ice carving," because ice company have ice mold. So, what they do, just fill the mold with water in the mold and then freeze. Then, they get the carving. So, I learned about food and ice decoration in cold country. Thank you manager, Fred Tilker.

Few months later, came back to Hawai'i. Week later, I went to union, told them I'm ready to work. So the union told me go to Kāhala Hilton Hotel. I worked there as saucier under chef Martin Wyss. After two years I got a job at Cavalier Restaurant as a chef. After two months, they sure liked my cooking. One day, at Ala Moana Shopping Center, Liberty House had hotel and restaurant cooking competition. After few weeks, they announced Cavalier took first place. Cavalier president was so happy, and he told me from next month, I was Cavalier partner. After years of running fine food restaurant, have to close restaurant because Mainland company bought Pan Am Building [where Cavalier was located]. And then, at the same time, our lease was over. So, we closed down.

And then one day, manager from Japan Airlines ask me to be their chef, so I work at Japan Airlines. They were so happy because I improved their food, but working place was too far for me. One day, friend of mine, Jerry Azuma, told me Pacific Club Chef [Wilbert] Kaya wants a food consultant. So, I took the job. Kaya was nice person, so I worked until I retired from Pacific Club. Now I'm eighty-two years old.

- MK: Okay, now we got the whole outline of your career. So now, we're going to work backwards. First of all, I want to know, going way back to your youth. What were your parents' names?
- WT: My father's name was Kosuke Takara, and my mother was Otome Takara.
- MK: Where were they from originally?
- WT: From Okinawa. Oroku.
- MK: I was wondering, when they came to Hawai'i, where did they settle?
- WT: In the Big Island, Hakalau.
- MK: What camp were they in?
- WT: They were in the, I think, Chin [Chuck] Camp.
- MK: What kind of work did your father do on the plantation?
- WT: My father, he was a plowman, with a mule, and plow the field.
- MK: How about your mother?
- WT: My mother was working in the cane field.

- MK: You mentioned last time that your father also had a part-time business. What was that business?
- WT: He was the only person own a car in the whole camp. So, people want to go to Hilo where they have hospital to visit their family. Then they hire my father. After work, they hire my father, and my father take them down there, just like he was running cab-like.
- MK: How about your mother? Did she take in any side work?
- WT: Yes, my mother was running poultry farm. So, she was busy selling eggs, chicken.
- MK: In your family, how many children were there?
- WT: You mean with me, my brother, like that?
- MK: Mm-hmm. [Yes.]
- WT: Myself, my second brother, and then my sister, and then fourth brother, that's all. One sister only.
- MK: What year were you born?
- WT: Nineteen-twenty.
- MK: When you look back, what do you remember most about your plantation camp life?
- WT: The thing I remember the most is my grandfather and mother they just live, two of them live together. Then, they was about one mile away from where we live. I used to live with them. Most of the time, I used to live with the grandmother, grandfather. So, anyway, they had money. Every time they buy for me all *da kine* goodies, so I don't want to go home. And then, one day, we was going to come on this island, then my grandfather and [grand]mother they're going to stay back. So, we had those flower plants at home. I dig that out and I told my brother help me carry. We took the flower plant to grandmother's house. In other words, we want to take care our grandmother, give gift or make something at least. And then, we came here.
- MK: You mentioned that your grandmother and grandfather were living maybe like one mile away from you folks.
- WT: Yeah.
- MK: That's your father's parents or your mother's parents?
- WT: No, my mother's parents.
- MK: When you were living in Hakalau, where did you go school?
- WT: Hakalau. From, you know, our camp was Chin Chuck Stable, and then we walk down to Hakalau for school. It's oh, so many miles, you know.
- MK: What did you think of school in those days?

- WT: We want to go to school because we can buy candy and all kind of stuff. When you live way in the country, in the sticks, you don't have those things.
- MK: So those days, when you say you used to get candy and stuff from the store, what store was that?
- WT: Gee, I can't even remember. It's so long ago.
- MK: Was that plantation store or private?
- WT: No, no, that private. I know that owned by Japanese people.
- MK: How many grades did you go to school in Hakalau?
- WT: In Hakalau, till ninth grade.
- MK: In Hakalau? So, when did you folks come to Honolulu?
- WT: So anyway, when we came to Honolulu, then I going be tenth grade. Then I went to Wai'alae Intermediate School.
- MK: Because you were coming from Hakalau and you're coming out to Honolulu, what did you think about Honolulu in the beginning?
- WT: Well, the neighbor kids about my same age, so we came good friends. We go over there, lunch hour, and then they have cracker or bread with the butter and jelly. Okay, those days, we never try, so you know the butter, we eat the butter like that. You know the block butter. So, we thought, *chee*, people over here so terrific, nice. Because Hawai'i, you are a good friend, but you cannot give nothing. You don't have anything in the country. When we came over here, it was really surprise.
- MK: Where in O'ahu did you folks live in the beginning?
- WT: Wai'alae-Kāhala. You know where they have the post office now?
- MK: Yeah.
- WT: My house used to be right on top there.
- MK: How did your family make a living over there, in Wai'alae?
- WT: In Wai'alae, my uncle and my mother, they was running poultry farm and pig farming. And then, my father used to work as a yardman in Pacific Heights, these homes for the rich people. He had a pick-up truck, so coming-home time, he pick up all the pig slop for the pig and then used to come home. So they was doing real good.
- MK: Because you moved from Hakalau to the Wai'alae side, was there anything that you missed? Because you moved to the city, you moved to O'ahu, did you miss anything from Hakalau or the Big Island?
- WT: Yeah, I missed swimming in the river. Because down here, you don't have those things. Down there, everybody our age, they go swimming. And then if cold, they lie down on the stone, big stone, and warm up. During the night, you put lantern and then you walk

inside the river. All those, what do you call those, snail—no, you no call that snail—*‘opihi*, the shell *‘opihi* be all on top of rock, and we just go there and pick up all the *‘opihi*.

MK: Cannot do that nowadays, yeah?

WT: No, no. They don't. So, down the Big Island, those things are plentiful.

MK: When you folks moved to O'ahu then, you don't have a river to go play in, what did you folks do for fun out here in Wai'alae?

WT: What we used to do is go down the beach. This Kāhala Beach, it's kind of near, so we all used to go to Kāhala Beach. Saturday, Sunday, kill all day over there.

MK: Swimming or fishing, or what did you folks do at Kāhala Beach those days?

WT: Oh, swimming. We too young, we don't know how to even fish. So, we just swim and play, wrestle and all that, what kids do. Then after we live on this island about two, three years later, then we start knowing everything. What we used to do, walk all the way to Kaimukī, Wilhelmina Heights, they didn't have too much house, only few houses. That's how we used to kill our time, and then get skateboard, go down and skateboard.

MK: Skateboard? (Chuckles) Wow.

WT: We make our skateboard. Take the skate wheel out of *da kine* skate.

MK: Those days, what did you think of school when you moved over here?

WT: Oh, I liked it. Because on the Big Island, country school, so every lunch we have to bring lunch from home. Then down here, you buy the lunch, so the lunch taste so good, all different. Because you stay down country, what do you get mostly? It's only *tsukemono* and *nigiri*. That's about all you get, so the school was real good. They have the good lunch.

MK: So you had variety in the school lunches.

WT: Yeah.

MK: How about the classes?

WT: The classes was good. Our age people was real friendly because Wai'alae just like the country before. Before the bus, for catch trolley, they had trolley before. The trolley only come till Kaimukī over here. And then from there, Wai'alae, we have to walk, you know. That's why no more bus or anything.

MK: So used to be more country then, Wai'alae area.

WT: Just like our area was just like country.

MK: And then you mentioned like your family had poultry and . . .

WT: And pig farm.

- MK: . . . pig farm, so what kind of chores did you folks have, you and your brothers and sisters?
- WT: Yeah, we used to help only the poultry. Because before you pack the egg in the dozen egg packer, you have to wipe all the egg. So, me and my brother used to wipe all the eggs for my mother.
- MK: Did you folks get paid for your help?
- WT: Those days, *da kine* kids, they never asked for money from the parents. But, you know what we used to do, me and my brother, we used to take about two dozen egg and then we go down Kāhala, we go sell the eggs. Those days, eggs was fifty cents a dozen, so we go Kāhala we sell the eggs for twenty-five cents a dozen. (MK chuckles.) We sell that right there and we get fifty cents. We go to those—the Kāhala Beach, they have those wagon-like, they sell candy, they sell all those things. So we used to go over there and party up. Every time we go we had a party.
- MK: So, your family had the hog farm and the chicken farm, and you folks were going school. And how many grades did you go to school over here?
- WT: Until ninth, Lili'uokalani.
- MK: How come you didn't go after ninth grade, what happened?
- WT: Those days, real poor, depression. So, instead, you try and find job and you going try work.
- MK: Last time you were telling me that at age thirteen you started working at Kaimukī Inn. How did you get that job?
- WT: Because my father and the Kaimukī Inn, the boss [George Takara], were friends. That's why, I guess, they told them that if I can work there, they can take care of me. So, I was working there.
- MK: What kinds of jobs did you have at Kaimukī Inn?
- WT: I had everything. Dishwasher, busboy, and then cook helper, everything. And then, killing animal, too. You know, those days, you don't have a freezer or ice box. Ice box, you made box, and you buy ice and you put ice inside the box, and then you get ice box. So, the food don't keep too long. That's why, chicken like that, once a week, they delivered a chicken. My father them used to deliver to Kaimukī Inn, and then my job was, if they bring about one dozen chicken, I have to kill all the chicken and then take the fat out. I was good at those things already.

And then the restaurants, they raise rabbit in a cage, so every time they get about six rabbits, then when the waitress order fry rabbit to the cook, then the cook going be after me. So, I raising the rabbit, you know. When you raise the rabbit it's kind of close to you already, so hard to kill 'em. At the end, I had to. You start getting ideas. So when they says, "Wally, kill one rabbit." I run to the cage, then I don't look at the rabbit, I just put my hand in and grab by the leg and I pull 'em out. I put big rock on the side of the cage and I just bam. That's how I used to kill 'em. Then, the skin, you just cut the skin like that, like that, and then the neck like that, then you hang it. Then you pull the skin, all the skin come off easily, then I give it to the cook and they cook.

And then, even lobsters, every time they keep about six lobsters, underneath the sink. You know how they keep them alive? You know those [burlap] bag, they wet the bag, and then they cover these lobsters, and then they stay alive.

MK: So those days, the food was really fresh.

WT: Yeah, real fresh.

MK: You had fresh chicken, fresh rabbit, fresh lobsters.

WT: Yeah.

MK: You know, this is the first time I'm hearing that rabbit was served.

WT: Yeah, that's why, *chee*, the first time I get really hard time kill the rabbit. But, if I don't kill 'em fast enough, then the cook going come after me.

MK: Was rabbit a common dish in those days?

WT: Yeah.

MK: How would it be prepared?

WT: They fry it.

MK: Compared to say eating beef, chicken, pork, or rabbit, was there a difference in cost? Was rabbit . . .

WT: Rabbit used to cost more because real special. You keep 'em alive until they order.

(Laughter)

MK: And then, you mentioned the Kaimukī Inn people, they were friends of your dad's. What do you remember?

WT: They were the same *tokoro*, Oroku. That's why, they good friends.

MK: What do you remember about the people that worked there when you worked there?

WT: Oh, anyway, yeah, I knew a lot of people, but they way older than me, so I kind of forget.

MK: You mentioned that you were even cook's helper over there, yeah? What did you learn besides taking care of the slaughtering of the animals?

WT: I was in charge of making mayonnaise every day. In those days, you don't buy mayonnaise, you make mayonnaise. And then, peel the onions, all like that, for the cooks.

MK: How did you learn to make mayonnaise or the peeling, did they instruct you?

WT: The chef have to teach you how. Then that becomes your job, then you come real good at it.

One time, while I was in school, Kaimukī Inn, the roof was burning. So the fire people, they stay on the roof with a hose pipe. That's when school just finished, they call Lili'uokalani School. Kaimukī Inn right there. So, I came to Kaimukī Inn. Then all the working guys people they stay outside the restaurant, and then they told me fire. You know what I did? I run inside the dining room and they get a candy case, I carry the candy case. I figure, I going save the candy. Then I took them outside on the sidewalk, I left it on the sidewalk. Then, all the school kids pass by, they took all the candy. At the end, no more candy. All the working guys and then even the bosses they telling me, "Why didn't you carry cash register out? Why you carry the candy out? You save candy."

I tell them, "Hey, my age, candy is the most important, not money."

(Laughter)

MK: Oh boy.

WT: Youngest, I have all funny kind [of] things to do.

MK: You worked there when you were thirteen, were there other young people working at Kaimukī Inn that time?

WT: Yeah, every restaurant, they had young people working as a busboy, dishwasher, those things.

MK: Those days, were you just *minarai* or were you paid for it?

WT: *Minarai*. The first one year you don't get paid, you *minarai*. And after that they pay you maybe one week, quarter or fifty cents. Then, you put in long hours, though.

MK: How long were you working at Kaimukī Inn, the hours?

WT: The hours, like weekend, Saturday and Sunday, ten hours a day. And then, school days, six hours. That's why, no more time for study, more working.

MK: Since you were working over there, were you able to get fed over there? Were you fed your meals over there?

WT: You mean, they feed me? Yeah. Every restaurant, they have employees' meal. They don't serve you the customer's kind [of] meal. They serve you employees' meal. Food, you always have stomach full. But, when it come to Saturday, Sunday, you get *da kine* regular cooks work with you. Then, we make believe we cleaning the chimney, so we go on top the roof. Then, the cook put down a string from the roof, then like Jell-O like that, we cannot eat, eh? But Jell-O made in the Jell-O cups, so easy to tie that. Tie that, and put 'em all up, and then whatever we not supposed to eat we tie it with a string, put it up on the roof, and then that's how we used to eat. And then, clean the. . .

MK: (Chuckles) Oh, boy. And so, since you got to taste some of the customers' food, the kind of food the customers ate, what did you think about the food at Kaimukī Inn those days?

WT: Those days, anyway, after that I work different places. Kaimukī Inn, they had good food, that's why they were busy. But after Kaimukī Inn, the government, during the war, they took the Kaimukī Inn. They sold 'em after that, though.

MK: And so like, Kaimukī Inn in your time, when you worked there, what were they known for? What was their specialty?

WT: Their specialty was on the dessert, that was apple, what do you call that?

MK: Apple pie or apple crisp . . . ?

WT: Not apple, I say banana filling pie.

MK: Banana cream pies?

WT: Yeah, but it's made different. You know the crust? They make it like this, just in one cup, then fresh banana and then *da kine*, the cream sauce. Always cold, see. Then somebody order, chop up the banana, and then put 'em in a bowl, and then they put the cream mixture, mix 'em up and put it in the shell. Then, they serve. Oh, people used to go crazy for 'em. That's the only place I see they serve like that.

MK: Would you remember who the chefs were those days?

WT: *Chee*, I forget all the names.

MK: They were older than you.

WT: Way older.

MK: You're only thirteen years old, but what did you think about working in a restaurant?

WT: At the end, you want to learn how to cook and make good money because you know the cooks and the chefs making good money. So you figure, one day you want to be a good chef and make plenty money. That's how you come because from young time you work in the kitchen. That's why, every time, you think you going to learn this, learn that.

MK: So were you like at Kaimukī Inn, were you watching the chefs to figure out how you can. . . ?

WT: Yeah, every time I tell him, "How you make the stew? Let me make, mix 'em in." I go and help him every time, but I doing my job, dishwashing job. Then, I finish 'em up fast and I go over there and learn. So, when you do your job fast, and then you try to learn, they going to teach you. They willing to teach you because that much easier for them. Then, they make you watch what they making. You stay over there, mix and watch, and then when boil you call him. Until then, he doing something else. That's why, it's how you act, eh?

MK: Yeah.

(Taping interrupted, then resumes.)

And then you were saying that you worked there—how long did you work at Kaimukī Inn?

WT: Three years.

MK: Three years. And then, during that time, did you work anyplace else?

WT: No.

MK: No place else.

WT: No, just Kaimukī Inn.

MK: And then the next place you worked was Royal Hawaiian Hotel. How did you get into Royal Hawaiian Hotel?

WT: That's where, my cousin used to work there. Cousin, Saburo Takara. He talked to them and he got the job for me at Royal Hawaiian Hotel as his helper. He was sauce cook.

MK: How did your cousin get to have that position, sauce cook?

WT: Because I guess he liked cooking. And then even that position real hard to get. That's number three man already. But I guess he really liked cooking, so he came good. I guess he worked there long time. From the young times he was learning, and then he became sauce cook. And after he became sauce cook, he want to do me a favor. So he say, oh, come work with him. At the same time, he teach me, too.

MK: So, in those days at the Royal Hawaiian, what types of guys were the number one chef and the number two chef.

WT: They had little older, *da kine* French.

MK: French chefs?

WT: They bring from Europe.

MK: How did they treat you, fifteen-year-old local Okinawan boy coming to work at Royal Hawaiian?

WT: Youngest, so they treat you nicer. Because usually older people kinda little sassy, huh? But, if young, everything, "Yes, sir. Yes, sir." They tell 'em do this, do that, they'll do it. That's why, they teach you, too, but the older guys, they don't teach them. Because when they learn, they get the nose in the air, eh? They know that. They get sassy. That's why, they willing to teach me when I was there. Everybody was willing to teach.

MK: When it came to teaching you, was it just by watching that you learned or did they actually say, "Okay, this is what you do. You put one cup this, two tablespoons," as they give you the recipes and teach you how to do it?

WT: They going to tell you because old cooks, chefs like that, they, what you call, only learn cooking. No more education. That's why. If they teach you something they are doing, they tell me, "Okay, one cup so much this, one teaspoon this, one tablespoon this," and make you write 'em. Then I write 'em down. Then I make 'em like that how they want you to make 'em. Then I keep the recipes. I learned quite a bit over there.

MK: You were saying that the older chefs were like French, how was it with the language?

WT: On the language, too, they get hard time talk to you. Anyway, usually they get *da kine* French people but American-born. You know, they usually hire office worker. They interpret. What they cannot say, the office come and tell me. That's why, you know.

And then, see, before the war, in America and in Japan, cooking job was the lowest job. That's why, even us, we be cook, eh? Then the friends tell us, "Hey, what are you doing?" We no tell we been doing cook. We tell we doing something else. Because before days, shame, you tell 'em you cook. That's why. But after the war, cooking job came number one. They bring all the teachers, big kind [of] chefs, all, cooking school, all the hotels. That's why now, what you call, cooking way on the top, here.

MK: Even among like local people, did local people kind of look down on cooks or . . . ?

WT: Yeah. That, old days. That's why, they don't want to be cook.

MK: How did local people look on people that owned the restaurant, though? You have a cook, you have a restaurant owner.

WT: Restaurant owner either they learn, they work as a waiter, or as a cook helper. And then they learn, and then they become good cook, and they open a restaurant.

MK: When someone open up their own restaurant, in those days, how were restaurant owners looked as?

WT: Oh, . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

MK: We were just talking about how cooks were looked down upon in Japan and America. But you said that you become the restaurant owner after you move up from helper to cook to restaurant owner, people look up to you.

WT: Yeah, because you businessman.

MK: And then, in those days when you started working Royal Hawaiian, you had your cousin, Saburo, and you had the French chefs, what other people were working at Royal Hawaiian?

WT: Plenty local people start working. They were all learning, coming up.

MK: In those days, from the group that you knew at Royal Hawaiian when you were a teenager, who do you remember going up and starting their own restaurants later?

WT: Saburo. And then [Wallace Teruya of Times Grill and] Times Supermarket.

MK: Wally Teruya?

WT: Yeah. Quite a bit. I forget already.

MK: So there were quite a few of them that were working as young boys and then they moved up. And, you know, you mentioned your cousin, Saburo Takara. The restaurant he opened, Ramona Café, you worked at little bit?

- WT: Yeah, only part time was. I was helping him. I was doing cooking, and then when they get enough cooks, then he used me as a bartender. If the bartender they get, everybody come work, then I used to be something like waiter, cashier. Oh, I did everything.
- MK: You did everything.
- WT: Everything.
- MK: You were like the extra hand then, could do everything.
- WT: Because he's my cousin, so. And then he make me do anything. Anything what he no trust people with, he going trust me.
- MK: Because you're family.
- WT: Yeah. And, that was when I was only working part time.
- MK: And like, Ramona Café, where was that located?
- WT: Ala Moana [present Gold Bond Building site on Ala Moana Boulevard].
- MK: What was Ramona Café known for?
- WT: A high-class restaurant. *Chee*, they were so busy ever since they open. First they built it small, so they keep on, keep on extending.
- MK: When you say it was a high-class restaurant, what kinds of things did they serve?
- (WT's wife enters. Taping interrupted, then resumes.)
- MK: You were saying, Ramona Café was like a high-class restaurant.
- WT: Yeah.
- MK: How come you say "high-class," what made it high-class?
- WT: Because he was working in Royal Hawaiian Hotel as a saucier, as one of the top cooks. So naturally, he learn French cooking. Those days, people, they don't know about French cooking. So when he open Ramona, the menu, we make more on the French style. That's why Ramona Café was real up.
- MK: And so, he has like French-type food, which was different from other restaurants.
- WT: Yeah. Different restaurants are more on the American side, but his one was more like French.
- MK: So the other ones had like veal cutlet, spaghetti, beef stew, hamburger steak. Ramona Café didn't have that kind of menu.
- WT: No, they had that kind, but they make it different. You know, they make 'em high-class. Even hamburger steak, everybody can make hamburger steak. But the mixture, different. And then even beef cutlet, you had to know what type of meat you use. Then you make high-class kind. You use tenderloin, and then you breaded the meat. The meat so tender,

so taste good. But you know, regular restaurant, just beef cutlet and veal cutlet, they make *da kine* cheap kind meat. That's why, tough, you got to chew. And then, hamburger steak, they get meat. They grind it, 50 percent meat. And then they grind 50 percent oil. And then they mix 'em up, and then they make. That's why, oily, and taste different. But you go to high-class restaurant, the oil is only about 20 percent. That's why, the hamburger taste different, too. That's why they had to charge them little more.

MK: So Ramona Café was a more high-class restaurant. So who were customers then, at Ramona Café?

WT: *Chee*, plenty local customers.

MK: Locals?

WT: Yeah.

MK: Not necessarily *Haole*?

WT: No, not. Because those days, no more too much *Haole*. But the local customers, they all looking for better food, eh?

MK: Because it's a high-class kind of restaurant, how about like the waiters or waitresses, what did they wear? Were they like same like waiters or waitresses at other restaurants?

WT: Different. Okay, when you go to the high-class restaurant, when they serve you water, they put on the right-hand side. When you go to *any kine* restaurant, they put any, left side, center, all like that. And then when they serve you, they serve you from the wrong side. When you go high class, you have to know how to even serve. And then, if you going drink soup, they bring you soup spoon. But if you go to a cheap place, they going to bring you teaspoon, right? Doesn't make any difference to them.

MK: So this Ramona Café was more high-class: the food they served, the service that they gave. Where did he get all the workers then who could do things like that?

WT: At that time already, people like learn. All the restaurants getting busy. Plenty restaurant that opening up. That's why, now, everybody, they want to work in better place, even the waitresses, huh? Yeah, was all different.

MK: So that Ramona Café, I'm wondering, how come it only lasted short period of time? Only 1939 to about 1945. What happened?

WT: Funny thing, you know, soon after the war, they lost their lease, I think. That's why, they sold the restaurant to Chinese people. But they never last long.

MK: And then, so your cousin, did he open other businesses after that?

WT: Yeah, another restaurant they opened in Mō'ili'ili. *Chee*, I wonder what the name of that restaurant? [The restaurant, Café Paris, was located 'Ewa of Kūhiō School on King Street.]

MK: He opened it up in Mō'ili'ili?

WT: Yeah. Big restaurant, they opened. Then that restaurant was busy, too.

- MK: Your cousin, was he running the Ramona Café and that other restaurant like a family business?
- WT: Yeah.
- MK: So did his children continue in the restaurant business, too?
- WT: The children was still young yet. They were attending University of Hawai'i, so they didn't work. They have all hired workers. So one day, he died so their business fell away.
- MK: For you, you were part-time Ramona Café, part-time Royal Hawaiian Hotel. First you started out as assistant to your cousin, and then as time went on, how high up did you go at Royal Hawaiian?
- WT: Saucier.
- MK: You went up to saucier.
- WT: I want to be a chef. Anybody offer me chef job, I take 'em right away. That's why I went to Queen's Surf as a chef, then I went to Don the Beachcomber as a chef. [Then, Pacific Club as chef.] And then, I went Cavalier as a chef. Then I went Japan Airlines as a chef. [Before all that,] I went 49er's Restaurant as a chef. And I went to Madison, Wisconsin, Elks Club, as a chef. That's why, in other words, I wanted make name, being a chef.
- MK: You were already a chef at Queen's Surf at age seventeen. You were really young when you became a chef. Was that unusual to be . . . ?
- WT: Unusual before, you know, that young to be a chef. So if you're young, and anybody, big business, come offer you more pay and everything, quick, you're going to take, eh? Then, not only that. You want to know how good chef you can be. That's why, when somebody else, a better place, offer you a chef job, you take 'em. When somebody else offer you, you're going to take it. And then funny thing, those days, a chef was real popular. They know you as a chef, everybody want to hire you.
- MK: And then, so like as you changed from place to place, you know, did you learn new things?
- WT: Yeah. You learn how they operate, how they charge the food. How you make the party. And then after the party, you go in the party crowd to talk to everybody. "Oh, how was your food? How was this, how was that? How you liked it?" Then, you find out. Everybody say good, then you keep on doing the same way, that type of food. But if somebody say, why don't you do this and that, that, that. Then you know already that particular food was no good, so you change it.
- MK: So being chef, you didn't just stay in the kitchen, then?
- WT: Oh, no. You talk to the customer, that's the main thing.
- MK: You used to come out to the front of the house?
- WT: Yeah. That's why, to be a good chef, you have to go outside and talk to the party members.

- MK: Mmm. And then, your type of cooking is not like the regular local type cooking of hamburger steak, spaghetti. It's not that kind of cooking. It's more European. Besides learning from other chefs you watching and learning as you went up, did you also learn from like books, or classes, or training?
- WT: Like cooking, I can learn while cooking. But if you be a chef, you better know about baking, too. That's why, baking, I went baking school. Then, you know baking, at the same time, you can. That's why, that kind of chef, hard to beat because they know everything, what supposed to be.
- MK: So where did you go for your baking training?
- WT: Down Kapi'olani [Community College] baking school.
- MK: So did you go to baking school same time you were working or you took off?
- WT: No, same time, while I working. Nighttime, I take the lesson. Daytime, I work my job.
- MK: It's kind of rough yeah.
- WT: Yeah. Evening time, then go to baking school. And you know who became the baker in my family? My youngest brother [Walter Takara]. And then he made plenty money. And he still making money. Call it Kilani Bakery.
- MK: Oh. Wahiawā side?
- WT: Wahiawā.
- MK: He's a well-known bakery.
- WT: Yeah. That building, he owns the building. And then, behind there, they got big apartment. He owns the apartment, too.
- MK: That was a good choice for him then, go into baking.
- WT: Baking, yeah. And then you know this—before, they had Kaimukī bakery over here. What was the name now?
- MK: Ninth Avenue?
- WT: Ninth Avenue Bakery. That's his father-in-law [Chosei Zukeran].
- MK: Oh.
- WT: That's why after he went to baking school, he went Ninth Avenue Bakery, learn how to bake, too. Then he opened the Wahiawā bakery.
- MK: I was at Kilani Bakery maybe one and a half years ago when my son took his license at the Wahiawā police station. So we went early in the morning and I bought pastry over there. That was good. It's well known, and you can see the apartment building right there, big parking lot. This was five-thirty in the morning and there were customers real early in the morning. (Chuckles)

WT: You remember that, eh?

MK: Yeah, Kilani Bakery. So, over the years you've got into better, and better, and better positions. And you even were part-owner of like the Cavalier, yeah? And then you also told me that you folks also owned other restaurants. Like you had the TK Diner on Beretania Street. About when did you own TK Diner?

WT: That is right after the war. But we wasn't there too long because we want to open up a bigger restaurant. Anyway, you know what the "K" mean? Kaneshiro. "T" is Takara. We were partners, see. TK, you know, Takara and [Roger] Kaneshiro. That's why, it's TK.

MK: So you folks were on Beretania Street, and you said that you weren't there too long. And you moved to where?

WT: Kapi'olani [Boulevard]. You know, Kapi'olani, where get KGMB?

MK: Yeah.

WT: Over there, used to be Hawaiian Village, the old days. Hawaiian Village. So, they had the Hawaiian building and everything. So we made a Hawaiian Village Restaurant. You know what we used to specialize? *Kālua* pig. So every Saturday we made big party because they sell all the tickets. They sell 'em to all the service people, like the navy, the Hickam Field, all of that. That's why, you know *da kine* customer, they want to eat all Hawaiian food. That's why, we used to get every time about 150-200 person party, *lū'aus*.

MK: So that was like a *lū'au* then, yeah?

WT: Yeah. That's why, you know, when the customer, they come for dinner, dinnertime, we dig out the pig from the ground.

MK: So where did you make your *imu*?

WT: Right in the restaurant.

MK: (Chuckles) Wow.

WT: So, we were real, that time, popular. And business was so good. So the landowner, they took the land and chased us out. But you know who make us make the business there? The landowner had one friend. But the friend, he was running taxi stand. And then he had the taxi stand right in there, the Hawaiian Village. Because the owner no use over there. That's why, he park his car, he sleep over there. And then, he's the guy talked to us if we want to make restaurant there. So we look at the place. Ooh, it look real Hawaiian. That's why, even the roof all made of coconut leaf, eh? That's why, we figure, good. So we made it. Then we make, we was running, I think, close to a year. Then we came so popular, then the owner chase us out.

MK: So you only had it for a little while then?

WT: Yeah, only little while. And your customers were a lot of servicemen. How about tourists?

- WT: No, at that time no more too much tourists. Servicemen, they was happy to come in because they want to know about Hawai'i.
- MK: So you served like *kālua* pig. What else did you serve?
- WT: Okay. *Kālua* pig, *laulau*, everything Hawaiian. *Lomilomi* salmon, *kālua* pig. That's why, we were real popular. And then we had Hawaiian music, too.
- MK: You provided entertainment?
- WT: Yeah.
- MK: You also mentioned that you folks also had Nel's Café.
- WT: Yeah.
- MK: When was that?
- WT: That's my restaurant. My wife [Kiku Takara] was running it. That's a Hawaiian restaurant. We served all Hawaiian.
- MK: And where was that located?
- WT: Kaka'ako. You know Kaka'ako, they get theatre, Kewalo Theatre, eh?
- MK: Yeah.
- WT: About three doors down from that was. Oh, but we were popular place, real popular.
- MK: It's a good location.
- WT: Yeah. And lot of Hawaiians. Because you know the rubbish man [city and county refuse collectors] like that, the truck like that, all park Kaka'ako. That's why, they all come down, eh? Yeah, she had a busy restaurant.
- MK: And so, were you involved in that business, too?
- WT: I'm working outside, so she get hired help.
- MK: And then, later on, you said that café moved? It went to Liliha and Vineyard?
- WT: Yeah.
- MK: But same kind of food?
- WT: Same kind.
- MK: So you were working your restaurants, your wife had her own business?
- WT: Yeah, business. But I hear that Liliha-Pu'unui, when she moved over there, was no good. You know why? They get more housing people. Welfare people.
- MK: So you don't have the customers, paying customers.

- WT: Yeah. And welfare people, they come and they eat, and they run away. They no pay, run away. Had all kind. All kind [of] problems.
- MK: Whereas Kaka'ako side didn't have the problems?
- WT: Kaka'ako and all down there workers, that's why. They spend the money and bring all the family, too.
- MK: So, you have the experience of being a chef and also owning a restaurant. What's the good and the bad in being one or the other? Owner or the chef?
- WT: Funny, like myself, I just try to make name. I want to be all-star. So I only thinking about be a good chef. So somebody, some good place, offer me chef job, okay, I take it. And then I take a chef job, they say they pay me good, everything. But the food lousy and you no can learn nothing or you no improve yourself. Then you quit and you take another chef job. You go so many places, that much you improve yourself because you learn about business, and food service, and everything. Then, you'll be a good chef. Every time, so many people all chasing you.
- MK: So, for you, it turned out well, yeah? Turned out real well, yeah?
- WT: Yeah, for me, cooking was real good. And then, one time, I even was cooking—what do you call *da kine*—school, eh? I was one of the [faculty] . . .
- MK: Kapi'olani [Community College], right? The culinary program.
- WT: Yeah, I was one of the office over there.
- MK: So you helped bring up some young chefs, too, yeah, starting.
- WT: Yeah, yeah.
- MK: My last question is, since there were so many Okinawan-owned and -run restaurants, all *Orokun-chu*, what do you think made it possible for so many Oroku people to get into the restaurant business?
- WT: I think that Oroku people, different from the different *tokoro*, you know, Okinawan *tokoro*. Oroku is, you know why they call them *Orokun-chu*, eh? Because they get money. That's why, in other words, they telling them "Okinawan Jew." You know what I mean? But they businessmen. People, they jealous, that's why they call 'em "Okinawan Jew." (MK chuckles.) You know, anything, when they start making money or something, people, they name you all kind [of names]. And then, the Oroku people, they all get money. And all the family, they put the money together and they open a business. That's why, Oroku people, they get lot of business. But like the other kind [of] place, *tokoro*, the family don't put money together. And then most they don't have that much money. That's why, even till today, they always talk about Oroku Jew. Assume they talk about money.
- MK: So, with the Oroku people, then, they've been able to come together as families to raise capital then in order to start and support businesses?
- WT: Yeah, they always together. That's why, it's different. That's why, when my wife took me down Okinawa one day. Because I never go Okinawa. So I went. And them, near

from Motobu, mountain side, and us Oroku. That's why, we went to their relative house. You know what the relative was telling us? They tell all the kids, their friends, be sure you marry Oroku. (MK chuckles.) They think Oroku, they're the only ones get money. You know, marry them, eh?

MK: I'll end the interview here then, thank you. (WT chuckles.)

END OF INTERVIEW

The Oroku, Okinawa Connection: Local-style Restaurants in Hawai'i

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February 2004